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A STUDY OF JEREMIAH.

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THE book of the prophet Jeremiah is conspicuous, even in the rich field of Old Testament literature, for its many-sided interest. From whatever point of view we study the book, we shall reap an abundant harvest in knowledge and idea. The critic will discover an unlimited number of the special problems which he investigates. The historian will have unfolded before him a profoundly interesting historical drama: the decline and fall of the kingdom of Judah. The psychologist is presented in the character of Jeremiah with the most fascinating personality, perhaps, in the whole roll of Hebrew prophecy. While the devotional man will find rich spiritual pasture in the life and struggles and manifold spiritual experiences of one of the purest-hearted servants of God.

The special subject of this paper is: the place of Jeremiah in the development of prophecy and religious life in Israel.

It has become almost an axiom of modern theology that inspiration is not mechanical, verbal, or literal. "Not of the letter, which killeth, but of the spirit, which giveth life." The divine Spirit of Revelation speaks through the inspired personality of the prophet to the men of his time, in relation to the facts and movements of the time. Thus inspiration is conditioned, on the one hand, by the personality of the inspired writer, and, on the other hand, by his historical situation. The former element, again, is the complex of very many simpler elements. Of these, three may be treated as outstanding: (1) the natural character or disposition of the prophet; (2) his religious environment, especially the influence of earlier prophets; (3) his call, and personal religious experience. In an estimate of the prophetic and religious significance of the individual

prophet, therefore, we must take account of these four influences: his natural character, his religious environment, his historical situation, and his call and personal religious experience.¹

In order to arrive at a true idea of Jeremiah's prophetic and religious significance, we shall study the influence of these four determining factors—rather, however, in the free and natural course of their operation, than under separate rubrics.²

The eighth century B.C. marks the crisis of national religions. It was then that the great powers of Assyria and Egypt put forth their energies to win world-empire. As they extended their influence, the smaller nations of Syria, Moab, Ammon, and Edom were, one after the other, conquered and crushed. With them fell their gods, Chemosh and Molech. It was certain that Israel and Judah must, in due course, share the same fate. The great question then was: Would Jehovah, the God of Israel and Judah, fall with his people? This question resolved itself into the more fundamental one: Was Jehovah merely the national god of Israel, as Chemosh was of Moab, and Molech of Ammon? or was he the universal God, the absolute Lord of heaven and earth, the Prime Mover in the great drama of world-history?

Now, the popular conception of Jehovah at this epoch was undoubtedly narrowly and crudely nationalistic. To the great bulk of the people of Israel and Judah, Jehovah was simply their national God. If this conception had been universal, then certainly the worship of Jehovah would have perished as utterly as the nation. But at this crisis there were raised up by the Spirit of God men who saw deeper into the character of Jehovah, and who vindicated, against the popular conception, his absolute

¹ See a suggestive treatment of this subject in DUHM, *Theologie der Propheten*, Einleitung.

² This study of Jeremiah rests, of course, upon a close critical treatment of the text. The attitude adopted toward the leading critical problems of the book is, briefly, as follows: (a) In textual criticism, the Massoretic reading has been accepted as most nearly representing the original, while numerous suggestions and corrections have been adopted from the Septuagint. (b) In the field of "higher criticism," the more moderate position of critics like Davidson and Giesebrecht has been adopted, viz., to conserve for Jeremiah all that does not give clear evidence of lateness and different authorship. The radical criticism of Duhm and Schmidt (*Encyc. Bibl.*) seems to me improbable.

sovereignty and his righteousness. To them Jehovah was the one high and holy God, the Lord of heaven and earth, whose glory would be manifested even amid the ruins of Israel's national life. And through their influence, humanly speaking, it was that the worship of Jehovah not only survived the downfall of the nation, but even entered thereby into a new and more glorious life.

First Amos, the prophet of justice, asserted, in the face of the people's idolatry and immorality, the absolute righteousness of Jehovah; then Hosea, the prophet of mercy, appealed to them by the love of their God; after him Isaiah, the prophet of the divine transcendence and holiness, proclaimed the high and holy sovereignty of God. These earlier prophets, however, were not yet free from national limitations, or from one-sided conceptions of Jehovah. It was left for the fourth great prophet to break through their limitations and to transcend their differences, to unite in one great conception the justice and mercy of Jehovah, to balance his perfect holiness with his perfect love, to vindicate at once his absolute sovereignty and his universal grace. This fourth great prophet was Jeremiah, the prophet of personal religion.

Jeremiah was born at Anathoth, near Jerusalem, about 650 B. C., *i. e.*, toward the close of Manasseh's evil reign. He was the son of Hilkiah, a God-fearing local priest, perhaps a descendant of the priestly house of Abiathar. In the sanctuary of the godly home, the future prophet would be kept free from the corruptions of his time, and trained to fear and serve Jehovah, the God of his fathers. There was, probably, never a time when Jeremiah did not fear and love to serve Jehovah. This much, indeed, is implied in the words of Jehovah: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest out of the womb I sanctified thee" (Jer. 1:5); that is, Jeremiah was from the womb the servant and predestined prophet of Jehovah.

The definite call to be a prophet came to Jeremiah "in the thirteenth year of Josiah" (625 B. C.), when he would be some twenty-five years old. From the account in chap. 1 we can arrive at a sufficiently clear idea of what the call meant. And we shall find therein the germ, at least, of his whole prophetic

inspiration and thought. The call of Jeremiah presents an interesting contrast to that of Isaiah. The latter sees one overpowering vision of Jehovah's transcendent majesty and holiness; he falls prostrate, awe-struck, before the divine presence; and thereafter, being purified from his uncleanness and admitted into the holy choir of Jehovah's worshipers, he consecrates his life wholly to Jehovah's service: "Here am I; send me."

Jeremiah's call is less ecstatic, more calm and deliberate. Jehovah gives him no overwhelming revelation of his holiness. Rather, he unveils to him the meaning and purpose of his own life. He shows him how he has called and separated him, even from the womb, and how he has led and trained and disciplined him, during all the years of youth and early manhood, for his service. Now, when the full time is come, he calls him to take up his burden of responsibility: "I have appointed thee a prophet unto the nations" (1:5). The timid, shrinking, yet deliberate acceptance of the call is followed by the bestowal of new graces on the part of Jehovah. He touches the prophet's lips and puts his words in his mouth. He opens his eyes, and shows him visions of judgment and of grace. He receives him into his council chamber, and reveals to him the secrets of his divine government. He appoints him his plenipotentiary representative on earth. And he stands by him, to defend him against all the assaults of his enemies. "Behold, I have set thee this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, and to destroy and to overthrow; to build and to plant" (1:10). "And, behold, I am with thee, to deliver thee" (1:19).

Thus, in the call of Jeremiah, more completely than of any other of the prophets, the whole personality of the prophet comes into play. The appeal of Jehovah is to the deepest element of his being. And the prophet responds to the call "with all his heart and soul and strength and mind." Further, the revealing spirit of God is to Jeremiah no power now and again overmastering him from without, but an abiding personal possession; a spirit of light and truth continually dwelling within him; a living word within his heart; as it were, a fire in his bones, burning to find utterance.

The earliest prophecies of Jeremiah (chaps. 2-6) were uttered, to all appearance, immediately after his call. Their occasion was the terrible invasion of Scythian hordes from the north, which awakened also the prophetic inspiration of Zephaniah. These early prophecies of Jeremiah are of deep interest. In their definite message, quite on the lines of the older prophets, especially of Hosea and Isaiah, they yet breathe a wonderful freshness and originality. The language is terse, vigorous, and full of genuine poetry. In these chapters, indeed, Jeremiah takes his place at once in the front rank of lyric poets. "What a glorious prophetic writer Jeremiah was," exclaims Ewald, "when he first began his labors, before the hard fortunes of his late years had blighted the first tender bloom of his literary activity also." In Davidson's judgment, "the pathos and depths of these chapters are not surpassed by anything in Scripture."

Charming is the picture of Israel's early innocence: "I remember thee, the grace of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, how thou wentest after me in the wilderness, through unknown land. Israel was holiness unto the Lord, the first-fruits of his increase" (2:2, 3). But all too soon the fair picture is overshadowed with darkness. "My people, saith the Lord, have forsaken me, the well-spring of living waters, and have hewn them out stagnant cisterns—and these, too, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (2:13). Israel, planted a generous and fruitful vine, "has turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine" to Jehovah (2:21). She has become polluted through and through with foul iniquity, which neither lye nor soap can cleanse (2:22). She "playeth the harlot with false gods upon every high hill, and under every green tree" (2:20; 3:6). She "gaddeth like a swift dromedary, or a wild ass of the wilderness" after her lovers, the Baalim (2:23). She multiplieth gods in every city, and in every corner of the streets. She boweth down to "stocks and stones" (2:27), forgetting Jehovah "days without number" (2:32). The whole land is full of falsehood and injustice and all unrighteousness: adultery and lying and the shedding of innocent blood (2:34; 4:1 f.). Yet with all that, Israel boasts herself in her innocence, and relies with self-

complacent confidence on the gracious help of Jehovah, her God (2:23, 35; 3:5, etc.). But Jehovah will have none of his people's confidences. "How can I put thee among the children, and give thee the children's goodly heritage?" (3:19). His fierce anger is turned against the people (4:8). If they repent not, he will bring upon them his swift vengeance (4:5 ff.).

In chaps. 4-6 Jeremiah draws terrible pictures of the "foe from the north," the Scythian invaders, whom Jehovah will summon into the land as the instruments of his wrath. "Like a lion from his thicket, he goeth forth from his place to make the whole land desolate" (4:7). In one awful passage, the prophet paints the whole horror of the devastation which shall befall the land of Judah. "I beheld the earth, and lo! it was waste and void, and the heavens, and lo! they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and lo! they trembled, and all the hills moved to and fro. I beheld the land, and lo! there was no man, and all the birds of the heaven were fled. I beheld the fruitful field, and lo! it was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down before the fierce anger of the Lord" (4:23 ff.). Yet, in spite of his fierce anger, Jehovah was a merciful God. He would fain avert the impending calamity. If only his people would return unto him, he would blot out all their sins, and be gracious unto them. "Return, ye backsliding children," he appeals to them as a father; "return, and I will heal your backslidings" (3:22). "If thou wilt return unto me, O Israel, saith the Lord, unto me shalt thou return; and if thou wilt put away thine abominations out of my sight, then shalt thou not be removed; and if thou shalt swear, 'As the Lord liveth', in truth, in judgment and in righteousness, then shall the nations also bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory" (4:1 f.).

In the midst of his earliest prophetic activity, before he uttered the "words" of chaps. 5 and 6, Jeremiah seems to have left his home in Anathoth, to take up his residence in Jerusalem. It may be he entered that holy city with the feelings with which Luther entered the holy city of Rome. If so, he was as grievously disillusioned. In the capital he saw perhaps less coarse irreligion and immorality than in the country villages of

Judah; but far more deliberate and refined wickedness. There was, indeed, much outward profession of religion, much swearing by the name of Jehovah, much sabbath-keeping and temple-treading, and many sacrifices. But all this profession of devotion to Jehovah only threw into blacker relief the heart-corruption of the people. Their swearing by Jehovah's name was only the hypocrite's cloak to veil their abominations. With one accord, the people, high and low, pursued after wickedness, injustice and dishonesty, oppression of the poor and needy, the slaughter of the innocent, adultery, and all shamefulness. Indeed, it seemed to the prophet, as he cast his eyes over the city, that there was no man that did justly, none that sought truth. The leaders of the nation, the priests and prophets, who should have taught the people the ways of the Lord, were themselves the very ring-leaders in iniquity. Therefore, the harsh notes again ring out: If she repent not, the holy city of Jerusalem shall likewise be overwhelmed in the general calamity of Judah. "Be thou instructed, O Jerusalem, lest my soul be alienated from thee; lest I make thee a desolation, a land not inhabited" (6:8).

Jeremiah has thus already advanced beyond the earlier prophets, notably Isaiah, in so far as he can at least contemplate the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of the whole people. We shall see how the prophet was led, by the natural evolution of history, definitely to break through the Isaianic limitation, and to vindicate the universalism of Jehovah's righteousness through the utter destruction of Jerusalem, the ruin of the temple, and the captivity of the people. We shall see, too, how profound a bearing this had on his conceptions of God and religion.

Another characteristic note appears in these earliest prophecies. Isaiah always declares his prophetic "words" from the Olympian heights of his own unwavering faith in God. But Jeremiah can never dissociate his own personal feelings from his prophecies. The revelation of Jehovah's word touches and moves him to the heart, and ever and anon his feelings break through his words. At one time his heart is broken at the thought of

his people's sufferings. "Oh my bowels, my bowels! I am tortured to my very heart. I cannot hold my peace for pain, because my soul hath heard the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war, the crash of destruction upon destruction" (4:19 f.). And then again his soul is full of the fierce wrath of Jehovah: "I am full of the fury of the Lord: I am weary with holding it. Pour it out upon the children in the street, and upon the assembly of young men together" (6:11). We shall see how important a bearing this intrusion of the personal element also had upon Jeremiah's prophecies and religious influence.

A few years after the prophet's migration to Jerusalem, in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign (620 B. C.), occurred the great events narrated in 2 Kings 22:23: the discovery of the law-book, *i.e.*, the book of Deuteronomy, in the temple, and the consequent radical reformation of religion under the auspices of the king. To a mind like Jeremiah's, these far-reaching events would have appealed with irresistible force. The reformation must, indeed, have seemed the consummation of all his hopes and efforts: the re-establishment of Jehovah's kingdom of righteousness over the land. We do not wonder, therefore, to find him personally embarking on the work of reformation, and appealing to the people of Jerusalem and Judea—in the words of the remarkable prophecy in chap. 11—"Hear ye the words of this covenant. Hear and do them. For thus saith the Lord, Cursed be the man that doeth not the words of this covenant" (11:2 ff.).³

³ From the difference of standpoint and outlook between Jeremiah's maturer prophecies and the book of Deuteronomy, it has been argued by many scholars, notably by Davidson and Duhm, that the prophet's attitude toward the reformers was from the first one of more or less pronounced hostility. But, in spite of national differences there existed a profound spiritual affinity between Jeremiah and the Deuteronomists. They had the same elevated conceptions of Jehovah's majesty and holiness, the same lofty ideals of morality, and the same passionate love of purity of worship and hatred of idolatry. Besides these points of affinity, the countless reminiscences of Deuteronomy, in both style and thought, which meet us in the later prophecies of Jeremiah, are abundant evidence how deep and abiding an influence the book exerted on the still developing mind and character of the prophet. The direct evidence of chap. 11—the language of which is distinctly reminiscent of Deuteronomy—Duhm can only escape by the supposition that this passage is a Midrash, intended to bring Jeremiah into connection with the Deuteronomic movement. Nor is the fundamental contrast

I think we must count Jeremiah's activity in connection with the Reformation among the most potent influences of his prophetic life. As pointed out in the note below, the later prophecies of Jeremiah show countless traces of the influence of Deuteronomy, both in style and in thought. The prophet drank in the true spirit of the covenant, which the people in great measure disregarded; and that elevated and broadened his conception of Jehovah, as well as his ideal of morality. But his participation in the movement had an even more profound significance. For, just as Paul and Luther were led through the errors of Pharisaism and Romanism to their matchless insight into the gospel of salvation by faith, so Jeremiah was led through practical experience of the impotence of the "renewed covenant" to his almost Christian conception of the "new covenant"—the covenant, not of the letter and of law, but of the Spirit and of grace.

in principles between Deuteronomy and the "new covenant" of Jeremiah (chaps. 31 and 32), any real evidence against Jeremiah's participation in the Deuteronomic reformation. Rather, as we maintain, his experience in connection with that movement was the negative preparation for the clearness and strength of his conception of the "new covenant."

[To be concluded in the next number.]